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THE IDEA OF HUMAN DESTINY IN AFRICA : THE IGBO EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian filsosofis terhadap kepercayaan suku Igbo kerap tergoda menjadi sistematisasi menurut standard penalaran logis atau hanya menerangi keunikan-keunikannya yang berbeda dari sistem kepercayaan lain. Kedua-duanya luput menangkap kompleksitas dan kedalaman kandungan pengalaman konkrit suku Ibo. Artikel ini mencoba merumuskan kompleksitas itu dalam membahas khususnya kepercayaan Ibo tentang takdir dan kelahiran kembali. Dibahas disini ihwal tubuh material yang melampaui kematian, kaitannya dengan konsep Igbo tentang kemanusiaan yang integral dan identitas personalnya.

Key Words:

•*Going home* •*Life's primal importance* •*Natural death*
•*Unnatural death* •*Integral conception of man* •*Personhood*
•*Reincarnation; immortal soma* •*Earthly and ancestral phases of life.*

If we allow ourselves to be tutored by the physical nature, we shall discover in life a certain kind of order, intelligence or purposive will. An organism sprouts from nature, begins to utilize tools of sustenance and growth from nature, and finally dies leaving off everything to nature. The organism dies as if it had never existed.

The human being likewise, is a child of nature. Nature gives him tools for survival: eye to see; ear to hear; hand to make more tools, etc. Through the use of these tools, man enforces a close relationship with nature. The tools from nature are not his to own, but only to borrow. When his use of them is done, they are taken away from him together with all that he has acquired from nature during the short span of his living. At death, all the cells, particles and structures taken from nature to build this colony called life scatter and return to their origins.¹ Such is the mysterious story of the inescapable path of the vast majority of living organisms.

All through the ages, mankind has constantly been searching for answers to justify and resolve the secrets and mysteries of life. In doing so, various questions have been raised: what is the origin of life? How does human life come about? Why did it come? What is the end point of human life? Etc. All these are somewhat summed up in the question, what is the destiny of man?

Generally, the issue of human destiny, for the most part, has remained an enigma. It is one, which cuts across the bounds of race, culture, religion and states. It has in all epochs provoked personal and collective wonder. What do we say, for instance, when the life of a promising young person is cut off sharply by a disease germ, an automobile accident, poisoned food or armed bandits? What do we say when we see millions of defenseless people die in wars and natural disasters? Etc. Are our personalities with all their spiritual potencies destroyed as material forces in the world break our bodies? In short, what happens at death? Is there any life after, or does everything about the person end with physical demise? What is there, if any thing, in the spirit world? If people are convinced of a blissful life in the spirit world, why do the Igbos insist that, *nnorom ele uwa k'onye nwuru anwu mma*, that is, a worthless and hopeless life here on earth is better than the dead? Do those who go down to the spirit world come back to life? These are the perplexing issues that revolve around human destiny, which no one epoch or race has been able to fathom. We shall here, see the African attitude to this phenomenon vis-à-vis their notion of the 'person', as exemplified in Igbo culture.

Destiny: Meaning and Signification

The concept destiny is an ambiguous concept capable of more than one meaning. In one sense, it is used to designate the issue of 'fate' as in when a promising life is cut off sharply before its time, perhaps by an accident. In another sense, it is used to point at the state of man after death, his finality. As fate, destiny is seen as an absolute inscrutable power to which all living things are subject, and which may be either personified or delineated as impersonal. It is a unity or agency seen as an inevitable necessity controlling all things². Man's experiences show the limited extent to which he is able to mould events to his purposes. His origin and very many experiences of his life are impressed upon him, first as facts beyond his control; and secondly as data upon which he has to exercise his intelligence. These uncontrollable facts constitute human facticity or fate or destiny. Gbulie writes:

There can be no armor against fate. This I know for sure, especially with the advantage of hindsight. Fate, to my mind, curtails every person's liberty to act or do as he pleases. It cuts every human being down to size, peasant and patrician alike; and reduces every one almost to the status of a bar magnet in a field of iron fillings. There is therefore, no shaking off any situation or even changing the course of any event once fate has ordained it.³

Destiny, thus, is used to denote the series of causes and effects leading to one's history, one's death.

In religious terms, destiny means that every thing which exists from subatomic particles to the universe as a whole is known by almighty God. Every thing exists in his knowledge and he assigns to each a certain shape, life span, function or mission, and certain characteristics. Islamic scholars call it a "Supreme Preserved Tablet" or the "Manifest Record"⁴. In Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, for instance, Apollo (god) is shown as master of the enigmas of life who challenges man to escape from what is destined to him. Even though he (Apollo) does not directly induce all the hero's actions as is frequently found in Homeric poetry, his push was still insidious and inescapable leading Oedipus to realize his will though imperceptibly.⁵

However, as finality, destiny is used to designate a future, a vocation or a movement towards a generally 'unknown'. As a future or vocation, it can be applied to a visible end set for a moral personality. In this sense, it is akin to

the ordinary day-to-day use of the term, which is readily associated with the correlate concept – 'destination', the place where a person or thing is going. But as a movement towards the 'unknown', destiny points to the state of man after life. It seeks to resolve questions as: Is death inevitable for all? If all are destined to die what happens to all after death? Is it possible for the dead to reincarnate into new life forms?

Death: An immediate destiny for all

The issue of death is an enigma, which has confounded human ingenuity. Peoples of diverse cultures and various epochs have tried, though unsuccessfully, to fathom the mystery called death. Some have tried to explain it away by creating myths of its origin. Others, while resigning to the fact of its reality, have sought to create meaning out of it by assigning to it the indispensable work of opening the way to a blissful eternity. However these may be, the question of death has never received the last word and thus, debate on the problem it creates will never cease. More so, a lot of the things that men do, depend, to a large extent, on their vision of the limits of life. Albrecht writes:

“The unraveling of the mystery of death is truly the key to the door of life, for death is the final human destiny. Whatever happens beyond the grave, whether it be "something" or "nothing", reflects ultimate reality and gives us the context of ultimate meaning or absurdity in which we must live our lives.”⁶

As the final end-point for every human being, death is an issue for every one. And as the inevitable consummation of all mortal life, making dying a "profession" is a task to be achieved by all.

Among the Igbo, death is generally conceived of as a departure, and not a complete annihilation of the person. The major change at death is the decay of the mortal flesh and the spiritualization of the body which then moves on to another plane of existence to join the company of the departed. Thus, death only disrupts, but does not destroy the rhythm of life.

Death is the end of physical life. Some people will die as children; others at a youthful age; others as a result of protracted illness; and others from accidents; while others still at a ripe old age. In the end, death awaits every one. This is why the traditional saying has it that, *Onye na-anu onye nwuru anwu onu, ufo, onwu, na eche ya*, (He who rejoices over another's death should know that death awaits him). In the words of Ikenga-metuh:

“Onwu bu isi njedebe nke ndu. Ebe ndu bu isi, onwu bu nnukwu ihe mmebi. Onwu na-ewere ndi anyi huru n'anya mee ka anyi ghara ihukwa ha anya ozo, maobu metu ha aka ozo. Onwu na ewepu mmadu aka n'oru niile o bidoro, weta izuzu oma niile mmadu nwere n'isi njedebe. Onwu na-eme onye ogburu taa kpuchie onu.”⁷

Death dishonours and robs one of security and pride; it is implacable and frustrates all human endeavours. It is the inevitable end of every human life. The name *Onwuzurigbo* is a symbolic expression of the universality and inevitability of death.

In Igbo culture, the experience of death is both frightening and devastating. The news of death, thus, is handled with utmost caution. One is not, for instance told that, *nna ya nwuru* (one's father died). Rather, one can be told that *nna ya hapuru n'ututua*, literally, one's father left this morning. This act of 'leaving' to an unspecified destination is for them conclusive of the end of life. This is more so true, since there is a strong belief among Igbo that the dead has gone to the home of the spirits (Onye nwuru anwu lawara Ala Mmuo). Thus, death is seen as the beginning of the journey to the great beyond, a going home (*ina uno*) to the land of the spirits,⁸ which means that life here on earth is like a pilgrimage. The real home is in the hereafter. This is depicted in songs like:

*Anyi biara abia n'elu uwa,
Uwa anyi no n'ime ya obughi
nke anyio - oo
Ibe anyi biara n'elu uwa obu
abia n-o-o-o-o,
Uwa bu onye zuru nke ya,
ya ala n-o-oo.*

we are visitors on earth,
the earth we are in does
not belong to us,
we have come like people
who come to market
the earth is a place where
you buy and go home.

However, this vision that death is a going home, *ina uno*, is fraught with ambivalence. The Igbo simultaneously believe that life here on earth is of primal importance (ndu-bu-isi) and in consequence, death, *Onwu*, is a catastrophe; and also that death is a going home. Which other home? The problem of this ambivalence is resolved in the understanding that death, depicted as going home, *ina uno*, is a manner of expressing the inexplicability and inextricability of death, since the hope of every one is to be given the chance to come back to life again (i.e to 'return'). A home, generally understood, is a place where one retires after the daily work. And since death is the retirement point of life, it is called *ina uno*-going home.

In death there is a real cessation of part of the person, so that he sleeps but never to wake up again. All his activities, prospects and visions are brought to a halt. Death 'stiffens' the body, cuts down aspirations and 'evaporates' lofty ideas. It is cruel. Its cruelty comes out vividly in funeral dirges, like:

Onwu bu onye obi, o-o-o
Onwu bu onye obi, o-o-o
Ozuru ogbalagha

Death is a thief,
 Death is a thief,
 It steals and runs away.

The struggle of man against death is portrayed in another dirge as:

Onwu, anyi mere gi gini?
Onwu, anyi mere gi gini?
Anyi nyere gi ego
Onwu, anyi mere gi gini?
Anyi nyere gi aku
Onwu, anyi mere gi gini?
Iju, wee gbue nna anyi-o
Onwu, anyi mere gi gini?

Death what did we do to you
 Death what did we do to you
 We gave you money
 Death what did we do to you
 We gave you wealth
 Death what did we do to you
 You refused and killed our father
 Death what did we do to you.

Death, thus, is seen by the people as a monster before which man is arrantly helpless. Friends and relatives watch a person die, and they cannot help him escape it. It is a painful, pitiful individual destiny for which there is neither cure nor escape.⁹

In the traditional culture, there are divergent classifications of death.¹⁰ But careful study reveals that all these classes can be subsumed under two broad categories: **(1)** Natural death, *Onwu Chi*, and **(2)** Unnatural death, *Ajo Onwu* or *Onwu Ojoo*. *Onwu Chi* is called natural death because it occurs at a ripe old age when one is believed to have fulfilled the course of one's life: initiated into personhood, married and begot at least a son who will bury and succeed him in the family. It is the death of someone who has attained full personhood. In this case, death is accepted often with merry-making. The gun firing, as Mbefo would say, announces as much a man's death as his glory. The ritual ceremonies accord him a speedy passage into the calm, tranquil world of the ancestors.

Onwu Ojoo (unnatural death) on the other hand, is of three types: **(a)** Onwu ike, that is tragic death, is the death of a young enterprising one, who may or may not have gone through the stages of puberty rites. This occurs mainly through accidents. When it does occur, problems usually arise both

within the immediate family and the society at large. Enquiries are made through the diviners to find out the cause, and often, accusing fingers are pointed at persons. People who die tragically are not buried, but thrown into the evil forest.¹¹ They are expected to come back to complete their allotted life-span. But before then, they may join a malevolent spiritual cult, *Ogbonuke* so as to torment the living. The spirits of *Ogbanje*¹² belong to this group.

(b) Onwu Mgbabi (injurious death) is a form of death that desecrates the land, *Ala*. In this category are deaths from suicide, thunder and lightening (*Amadioha na kamalu*), from objects falling from trees, of thieves, witches and wizards, and also of someone still under public oath. Such deaths are traditionally regarded as taboo (*aru*) because they are believed to have offended the earth goddess. Hence, people involved in such deaths are never buried, but thrown into the evil forest. Their deaths are not ritually mourned, and their spirits will never reach the land of the departed. Rather they will continue to roam between the living and the dead (*ama ndi mmuo na mmadu*), tormenting the living members of their families and the society. The major part of the funeral rites is to placate the earth goddess (*Ala*), who their death desecrated, and to keep them in abeyance. Their state could be likened to that of hell in the Judeo-Christian tradition. If in the family a child is born shortly after this incident, he is most likely given such names as *Onwujiariri* (death brings derision) or *Onwumere*, which is a short form of *Onwu-mere-anyi aru*, 'death brought taboo to us'; 'death brought us shame'.

(c) Onwu obi mmiri (pitiable death) refers to the death of one who could not make a successful living either because of disability or other forms of sicknesses. The death of people with smallpox, leprosy, epilepsy or elephantiasis of the scrotum belongs to this category. For them, death is a welcome respite. They are not usually buried, but thrown into the evil forest. And no one mourns their failure in life. If sacrifices are made, they are made to plead with the ancestors so that they can give the diseased another chance through *ilo-uwa*. "When someone in this category dies, the people usually say, *ya laa jee zuru ike* (let him go and rest)"¹³ And if a child is born shortly within the family, he is given such names as *Ozoemena* or *Odoemena* (enough), that is, let such an experience not happen again.

On the whole, one thing is very recurrent in this Igbo belief system: Death is evil (*Onwu di njo*); death is a catastrophe (*Onwu bu nnukwu ihe mmebi*).¹⁴ Even though *Onwu Chi* (natural death) is the desired goal of every one, the dying, perceiving the approaching end, would always enjoin his

family not to allow his enemies see his corpse. Thus, revealing an attitude that sees death as a defeat.

Immortality: A Mediate Destiny for All

The notion of immortality springs from the idea of after life. The concept of death understood as a cessation of life does not completely swallow-up the reality and mystery of human life. Plants, animals, and all other forms of life but man are encapsulated by death. This is so because, death as a material evil does not have control over immaterial elements, and all cultures are agreed that man is a superstructure of material and immaterial components. What then if one may ask, is the form of life in the after life? What kind of a person survives the destruction of his material components?

In the sense which has determined to a large extent man's grapple with the issue of his temporality, immortality means immunity from death.¹⁵ It means "an infinitely prolonged (enduring) existence and personality of one and the same rational being"¹⁶; an unending duration of personal life. In this wise, 'personal immortality' is distinguished first from what is termed "collective immortality", which according to Mbiti, is man's end point in the here after; and secondly, from "personal remembrances", which are found in a man's progeny or in the fame of a distinguished personality. Personal immortality, therefore, points to the "unending existence of the individual in his own personality."¹⁷

Over the centuries, the question of personal immortality has been fraught with ambivalence. It is not logically possible to demonstrate how one and the same person could be both physically dead and the survivor of the same demise. Given the manifest universal materiality of persons and their consequent mortality, it becomes increasingly unintelligible to justify personal immortality. In fact, thorough-minded thinkers like Darrow dismiss it as a striking example of human credulity.¹⁸ However, proponents of personal immortality following the tradition of Plato have sought to resolve the impasse in the spirituality of the soul component of man and its immediate separation from the body after death. Hence, they commonly speak of the "immortality of the soul". According to them, at death, the material aspect of man, the body is shed away, while the spiritual aspect- the soul, continues an endless life. But this argument equally cannot be sustained without contradictions. Can the soul, which, according to western philosophy, is a composite part of the human person, singularly assume, at the demise of the body, the identity and personality of the

individual? If it can, does it mean then that man is simply a soul as Plato is wont to think? Or is he a soul that has a body? These and others are unresolved questions, which beset the idea of personal immortality. Yet, the traditional Igbo are not deterred in their belief in immortality and personal survival as the destiny of man mediated by death.

Belief in immortality is a major determinant of attitude in Igbo culture. As the saying goes, *etu onye si dozie akwa ya, ka o si edina*, that is, as you make your bed so shall you lie. The way one lives in this life, will determine the kind of reward one will receive in the hereafter. It is always the same person, the manifest decomposition of the body notwithstanding. This is not to be construed as heaven and hell reminiscent of Judeo-Christian religion. The departed, in this case, are very much alive in the underworld with much of the hierarchies and limitations found in nature, and thus, would need food, clothing and shelter,¹⁹ meaning that "post mortem" immortality is somewhat psychosomatic.²⁰

This Igbo concept of personal immortality is at variance with the platonic or more popular notions of the "immortality of the soul". In Platonism, as in most philosophies following the Cartesian principle of dualism, the body and soul are two disparate principles of life, which can operate independently of each other. At death, the soul assumes fully the nature proper to its being, while the body perishes. Hence, it is the "soul" or part of man that goes on to the world of the spirits for an unending existence, and not the "entire" man. But the Igbo have an integral conception of man. Just as death is essentially an event affecting the entire human person, so also does immortality include the whole elements in man. Onyewuenyi explains:

When a person dies, the traditional [Igbo] African does not say that the "soul" of the dead has gone to the spiritual world. It is not the "soul" or "part of man" that has gone to the world of the spirits but the whole man though not in a visible but invisible state.²¹

After death, "the man" still exists, as this or that person in a spiritual form. His bodily energy wanes but his vital force persists. He can appear to humans as ghosts, and be properly identified by his external appearance, which retains its erstwhile physiological qualities of shape, sound and motion. He lives in this form in the community of the ancestors, waiting to be rewarded by *Chukwu* (God) with the gift of rebirth into his human family. But if his journey to the community of the ancestors is impeded,²² he hangs between the living and the dead (agbata ndi mmuo na mmadu), appearing in visions as ghosts to cause havoc among the living. In whichever form, the 'living-dead' have an endless type of existence.

This manner of expressing the state of the living dead in Igbo tradition, however, has not escaped intense criticisms, especially from logical positivists. A thing cannot be and not be at the same time. This breaks the rule of the principle of non-contradiction. One wonders then what the nature of this 'immortal soma' is since the whole man and not the psyche is somewhat immortal. But this is not a peculiar problem to Igbo thought-pattern. It is an issue, which has to be understood within the general framework of the perplexity of the doctrine of immortality itself. In the ancient times, Socrates and Plato tried to resolve this issue by sidelining the body and ascribing to the immortal soul the full power of identity of the human person. Subsequently, in the medieval period, scholasticism and later philosophies which believed in the possibility of metaphysics acclaimed the substantial and incorruptible nature of the soul just as adherents of the higher religions²³ professed. Indeed, even though Christianity for instance, professedly acclaim the doctrine of the immortality of souls, she equally teaches about the spiritual resurrection of the body (cf 1Cor. 15: 44), which in this sense, may not be different from the 'spiritualized body' of Igbo anthroposophy.²⁴ Whatever be the inherent contradictions regarding the doctrine of immortality, for the traditional Igbo, what survives death is not just the 'soul' or 'spirit', but the 'real man' who continues to exercise in the hereafter all the physical activities of the world, perhaps, in a more profound way.

Another way in which immortality is seen as a mediated destiny for everyone is through personal remembrances. Personal remembrance, as a form of perpetuating the life of a once existent human person is most prominent within the family circle. In the traditional Igbo society, there is an obvious link between immortality of persons and the institution of marriage. The act of marrying and begetting of children is an indispensable part of the excellencies of one who has attained personhood. When a person dies, he is expected to be buried by his children. Phenomenally, he is no more, but part of his being survives in the memory of those who knew him while he lived, and most importantly, in the children who survive him. It is, so to speak, his immediate family that keeps him alive. For all practical intent and purposes, the personal immortality of the living-dead is dependent on his progenies. This is why it is said *onye a muru, ya amuta ibe ya*, (he who is born should beget others). And the progression goes on *ad infinitum*. This form of perpetuity of the life of the lineage is termed by some as 'corporate immortality'.

Personal remembrances are enhanced by the physical continuation of the traits of the progenitors on their progeny. When a man dies, he

becomes essentially 'force'. A person is 'really dead' when his 'force' of vitality is totally diminished.²⁵ But due to the preoccupation of the Igbos with immortality, the ancestors are always concerned with the increase of their descendants' vital force for the continuity of the clan through rebirths. Jahn notes:

"The whole weight of an extinct race lies on the dead ... for they have for the whole time of their infinite deathlessness, missed the goal of their existence, that is, to perpetuate themselves through reproduction in the living person."²⁶

This 'perpetuation of themselves through reproduction' is a way of effecting births in their clan without emptying their personalities; a way of perpetuating their personal marks of identity, which in a way enhances their personal remembrances and immortality. So long as there are persons in the family who bear the physical marks, or remember the physically dead, that person is not 'really dead', but 'alive'. "His name still remains something personal, and he can 'appear' to members of his family who will recognize him by name".²⁷ However, when the last person who knew the living-dead dies, the departed is then entirely removed from the state of personal remembrance and immortality and enters into the stage of "collective immortality" of the ancestral spirit. In effect, a person who has no descendants at death quenches quickly the fire of life. He is completely cut off from the human society, and his memories are easily lost.

On the other hand, there are the divinities that occupy elevated positions higher than that of the ordinary spirits in the ontological hierarchy of beings. These could have been national heroes or founders of the clan who were deified, and now sacrifices are offered to them. They enjoy specific personal remembrances, and their fame is immortalized, even though they may have existed centuries ago. This kind of personal remembrance is akin to the celebrated fame of distinguished personalities in various cultures, be they artists (like Michel Angelo), great politicians (like Constantine the great), or authors as when Homer, Shakespeare, Plato and Newton are said to be immortalized in their works. Thus, the performance of outstanding feats which heightens one's personhood in Igbo culture, is a sure way to securing personal remembrance even among generations unborn, and as such, a way of ensuring personal immortality.

Ilo-Uwa (Return-to-the-world) as the Revolving Stage of Human Destiny

The belief in the "rebirth" of an individual after death is widespread. This obtains differently among peoples of various times and cultures, and is expressed with different terms: reincarnation, metempsychosis, *palingenesis*, transmigration of souls, *ilo-uwa* (return to the world), *Ogbanje* (peater child), or simply rebirth. Even though the specific aim of this part of the work is not to examine 'rebirth' in its multiple dimensions, we shall first, present the popular notion of 'rebirth' as exemplified in 'reincarnation', so as to be able to effectively draw up a contrast between it and the Igbo idea of *ilo-uwa* (return to the world), which is the revolving point of human destiny in Igbo culture.

The term reincarnation is a rendition of two Latin words, *re* - again, and *incarno*, - to enter into the body, to en-flesh. Strictly speaking then, reincarnation means "to enter into the body again"; 'to en-flesh again', or to 're-inflesh'. This etymology appears vague and accommodative to all facets of the theories of rebirth. To those who propagate the principle of dualism, of the separation of soul from the body after death, it would mean the soul coming back to take flesh again. The soul returns after death to live in a novel human body through birth. Reincarnation in this sense is described, as the belief in the autonomy of the human soul, which passes out from the dead person into another body different from the original body. When the movement involves the soul leaving a particular species of animal to another or from animal to plant or minerals or vice versa, it is specifically called metempsychosis or transmigration of souls.

In reincarnation, the soul is reborn in a new body or in successive and different bodies. This life in a new body, or successive and different bodies is occasioned and conditioned by the previous life either for better or for worse. For some, it is a time of suffering and purification of past life. For others, it is a 'second chance' to correct one's previous faults, a chance that is open to all without exception. For others still, it is an 'endless cycle' which goes on to stamp the immortality of the soul. In all, the following features appear prominent in this concept of reincarnation: **(a)** the autonomy of the human soul which survives death, **(b)** the dissolution of the original body, **(c)** the acquisition of a new body or successive bodies; and **(d)** an 'endless cycle' that is open to all without exception.

But, to those who believe in monism, of the unity of body and soul even after death, reincarnation would mean the coming back of one undivided personality from its state of "corporeal immortality" into bodily

forms again. This etymology sufficiently covers both aspects of approach since it maintains some kind of neutrality with respect to the entity that enters into the body again. Hence, the veracity of the meaning: 'to embody again', or 'to en-flesh', or 'again in flesh'. The popular descriptions of reincarnation outlined in the preceding paragraphs are therefore from its derived sense and not strictly from its etymological roots.

On the other hand, the concept *ilo-uwa* (return to the world) is a compound word that has its roots from the joining of the two Igbo words *Ilo* and *Uwa*. *Ilo* is the noun root for *ilogha* or *iloghachi*, 'to come back', 'coming back' or 'to return'. *Uwa* on the other hand means the world, or life cycle. *Ilo-uwa* would then mean, "coming back to the world", or a "return to the world".

For the Igbos, the idea of *ilo-uwa* implies that a qualified deceased can return to the world through birth in his grand children, great grand children, or the children of his relatives or friends as a sign of love and fellowship. When a child is born, it is not just anybody but some dead relative or friend who has somewhat returned. When a woman gives birth to a baby, the question people usually ask is: *nwa o muru, oloro uwa onye?* (Who has returned in the baby delivered?). And through striking resemblances in bodily, emotional and at times behavioural dispositions between the newborn and the deceased, the specific ancestor that returned is identified. It is only when these features are not very prominent that the services of diviners (*Dibia afa*) are sought.

Belief in the return of personalities is universal among Igbos. This is buttressed by the people's experiences and assertions in daily lives. The expressions, *n'uwa m ozo*, 'in my next world', or 'in my next life cycle', *n'uwa m mbu*, 'in my first world', *uwa n'uwa m na'alola*, 'in whatever world I return to' or 'in whatever future life cycle I may return to'; *oloro uwa oma*, his/her return to the world is a blissful (good) one, etc, go a long way to emphasize the people's strong belief in *ilo-uwa*. In *ilo-uwa*, there is a 'replication' of personality. A person that was once there is expected to or seen to have returned. A passage from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* illustrates this further:

"Ezudu" ...if you had been poor in your last life I would have asked you to be rich when you come again. But you were rich. If you had been a coward, I would have asked you to bring courage. But you were a fearless warrior. If you had died young, I would have asked you to get life. But you lived long. So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before.²⁸

This funeral address to a person that was Ezudu is a typical expression of the traditional Igbo thought and belief about the destiny of the human person.

Now, following the etymology of *ilo-uwa* as seen above, two principal questions seek for solution: **(a)** who returns? Or put differently, who has the capacity to return? And **(b)** what actually comes back? Or in what manner does that, which has the capacity to return, come back? In response to the first question, the Igbos are unanimous with the position that only 'qualified persons', that is, members who attained 'personhood', married and begot at least a male child, lived a good life to a ripe old age, and were properly buried by performing all the ritual ceremonies, could return to earth through *ilo-uwa*. This description precludes two positions. First, the notion that only the ancestors do return²⁹ is very restrictive and thus is discarded since instances of women coming back have been established. Second, the idea that *ilo-uwa* is a complete and unmitigated expression of the will of the departed personality is doused by the concluding phrase of the description "could return to earth through *ilo-uwa*". The word 'could' as is used here means either/or. Hence, the mere accomplishment of the aforesaid qualities in the departed is not enough to bring him/her back through *ilo-uwa*. The fact of 'coming back to the world', *iloghachi n'uwa*, cannot be seen in isolation from the creative duty of *Chineke* in Igbo ontology. If the departed returns, he returns because he is permitted by *Osebuluwa* (the god that carries the world in his hands). Thus, far from being the result of unmediated individual idiosyncrasy, *ilo-uwa* is a public testimony of a request answered positively by *Chukwu*.³⁰

With respect to the second question: 'what actually returns?' certain perplexities are lurking. If we assert as some do, that what 'returns' is the same departed individual in his entire personality, we would be running the risk of bridging the rules of logical reasoning, owing to the fact of the concomitant cult of the ancestors. The Igbos are invincibly convinced that their dead exist as individuals in the spirit world. From the spirit world, those who are classed in the ranks of ancestorhood do not fail in their duty of fighting to protect their living children and of increasing their families with new arrivals,³¹ while the living descendants respond by offering sacrifices and prayers which in turn enhance the 'vital force' of the ancestors. Now, the all important question will be: Is it possible for the Igbos to sincerely and truly believe in the complete 'return' while at the same time recognizing the personal individual existence in the spirit world of the living-dead who are believed to have come back? This enigma has prompted many reactions. In fact, no serious-minded modern author now

believes in *ilo-uwa* in a complete or more serious classical sense of reincarnation. Igbo writers have insisted on the inheritance of ancestral characters as being the explanatory principle of this phenomenon.

Various authors, after careful examination of the issues involved, point to the resurgence of character traits in the descendants of an ancestor. For Arinze, it seems only a part of the ancestor spirit is believed born again in the new child. Eneh sees the concept of *ilu-uwa* as nothing but an interpretation of, an attempt to grasp, hereditary traits transferred by genes', while Onyewuenyi enjoins that what one sees in the new born is only a portion of the "vital force" or "vital power" or "vital influence" of the living-dead. An ancestor who is now 'pure dynamic force' can influence and effect many births without emptying his personality. His 'vital force' is such that it can be emitted into the "returned" baby without losing or diminishing his cherished place in the spirit world, just as the number and extent of the rays of the sun do not diminish it. Thus, instead of seeing a new born as a complete 'return' of a departed personality, it is differently seen as a 'vital influence', a 'personal ray' or a 'living- perpetuation'³² of the living-dead.

Ilo-uwa as thus delineated presupposes something tangible or noticeable of a person, which can stand for that person and re-enact his previous life in the new existent person. Here, an identifiable personality in the Igbo spiritual world is said to, in a mysterious but real manner, incorporate his personality traits on a new unique personality without destroying or substituting for that new personality,³³ and without diminishing his complete personal identity in the spirit world. The special impact of the identified deceased on the new born which Onyewuenyi calls 'vital influence' is identified by Ekwunife as a 'mystical influence' since it neither diminishes the status of the dead nor destroys the freedom and possibilities of the new born to achieve fulfillment in life.

It [*ilo-uwa*] is the process by which certain categories of the deceased in the African (Igbo) spiritual world of the dead are believed to be mysteriously, but in a real way, capable of incarnating their personality traits on a new born physical body of a child, without either destroying the new unique personality of the child or substituting for it.³⁴

Hence, *ilo-uwa* excludes *Ogbanje* (repeater child) and all other forms of transmigration of souls.

Fundamental Presuppositions of Ilo-Uwa

The concept of *ilo-uwa* in its definition and elucidation provokes an obvious question whether it is identifiable with the classical concept of reincarnation. Is *ilo-uwa* (return to the world) the same thing as 'reincarnation'? Most Europeans and European-trained African anthropologists would readily give away the Igbo idea of *ilo-uwa* for reincarnation. This is oversimplification. Perhaps a break down of the presuppositions of *ilo-uwa* (return) and 'reincarnation' will help clarify their points of convergence and divergence.

(I) *Ilo-uwa* proposes a 'unity of personhood'. In Igbo anthropology, there is an abhorrence of some form of dualism of the human person³⁵ of the complete separation of body and soul, with the consequent autonomy of the soul. The Igbos generally do not speak of the survival of the soul after death, but the person. Man is a living person. The living-dead are also living persons, though in a 'superior' plane of existence. Ikenga-Metuh writes:

"It is the full individual person not a part of him or his soul, which survives after death. Similarly at conception, a new individual person is created by God. This is so in spite of beliefs about reincarnation. What reincarnates...is not the personhood of the ancestor but an aspect of his self."³⁶

In *ilo-uwa*, what comes back is distinguishable from the 'returning' ancestor or 'living-dead'. Reincarnation, on the other hand, involves a proposition of dualism of body and soul. The body perishes at death while the soul survives and comes back to animate a new flesh/body. Hence, there is identity of souls of the departed with the reincarnate. This cannot suffice for *ilo-uwa*.

(ii) *Ilo-uwa* proposes that only 'qualified persons' can return, as against the classical position that all the dead can be reincarnated. The 'qualified persons' here, as I explained in the preceding paragraphs, have their basis in the attainment of personhood in Igbo traditional society. Children cannot return in the sense of *ilo-uwa*. The uninitiated (*efulefu*) and the unmarried have no hope of returning after death. Only individuals who have attained personhood can 'return' to the world. This is not to say that every one who attains personhood will 'return'. Rather, among all the qualities that make one eligible for *ilo-uwa* (marrying and begetting of a male child, living a good life to an old age, and receiving proper burial at death), personhood is at the

roots. Without the ritual initiation into personhood, it is not possible to acquire any of these qualities. For the Igbos then, *ilo-uma* is not a rule, but an exception. Only individuals who have attained personhood in Igbo culture have the chance to 'return' to mother earth.

(iii) *Ilo-uma* proposes that both the original body of the departed and the new body of the "returned" are considered side by side, while reincarnation implies a new body or successive bodies completely different from the original body. As a matter of fact, it is the visible or physiological resemblances that constitute the distinctive proof of *ilo-uma*. The resurgence of bodily marks, facial scarifications, vocal and oratorical powers, behavioural patterns and intellectual acumen are unmistakable proofs, among the Igbos, of the return of their "living- dead".

From the foregoing, it is very clear that the Igbo belief in *ilo-uma* does not express the content of reincarnation, and cannot be equipperated with it. Anozia had emphatically noted that "reincarnation or metempsychosis does not form part of Igbo belief."³⁷ What is seen in the false identification of the two belief systems is a 'language of accommodation' employed by Western and Western-trained anthropologists to explain away some un-understood phenomenon.

Among the Igbos, *ilo-uma* is one of the ways of explaining the mystery of life and death, which has its own internal logic. For any value judgment to be properly made here, it has to be within the entire framework of Igbo belief systems. The Igbos believe in life and death; they believe in the continuation of life after death; they believe in the relationship between the living and the dead, and they believe in *ilo-uma*, that is, the returning of the departed into the world. This relationship between the living and the dead, and the eventual 'return' of the dead to life has, to some extent, been explained away by the laws of genetics. Nonetheless there is something 'real' and mysterious about it. Onwuanibe has classified it as a 'paranormal feature,'³⁸ which will never cease to puzzle the rational mind. It is indeed, part of the things in religio-cultural belief systems of mankind, which defy accurate philosophical probing.³⁹ All the unresolved issues notwithstanding, *ilo-uma* is, for the Igbos, a phenomenon, which one needs to come to terms with. It is a dynamic revolving stage of the destiny of the human person

Hermeneutic issues and conclusion

In the recent past, there have been concerted investigations into the complex issues of human life, destiny, immortality and various forms of rebirth among the Igbo, and how these have been proved or manifested.

Even though the ordinary man is not bordered about adducing a rational, systematic proof of all in his belief systems, his 'unscientific responses' embellished with vivid life experiences are for him, more veracious than is proved by any rules of logic. This is the case with most articles of faith generally. Often the factual experiences seem to contradict the known laws of nature. Hence, any philosophical investigation concerning an object of faith would end up either systematizing the belief objects to the standard of logical reasoning, or highlighting their outright incongruity vis-à-vis other belief systems.

Of the many perplexing issues associated with the Igbo idea of destiny and rebirth, three appear to be more controverted than others. The first touches on the question of personal immortality, which according to the Igbo is not an exception, but a rule for all. How is this 'corporeal immortality' to be explained? Is it possible for a person to die and still live on in a somewhat corporeal form while the skeleton is under the ground? The second which is related to the first touches on the 'ubiquity of existence'. Is it possible for the 'living-dead' to maintain their cherished status in the spirit world, while at the same time exist in the newly born children? The third pertains to the explanation of Igbo understanding of *ilo-uma* as mere 'resurgence of genes' and the criteria which the traditional people place on prospective returnees. If *ilo-uma* is a mere resurgence of some particular biological traits, why does it exclude, for instance, the wicked, those who died a bad death (Onwu Ojoo) and those not accorded ritual burial at death? These issues touch both philosophy and theology, and have been for long, objects of scientific scrutiny. We do not have a ready-made solution to the problems arising thereof from the past. And we do not claim to proffer conclusive ones either. What we do promise is to subject these issues to critical reasoning and see whether there would be a way out of the impasse.

The term immortality, strictly speaking, means immunity from death, deathlessness or 'permanent survival' of one and the same entity. An immortal being is not hemmed by the space-time contingency. 'Coming to be and ceasing to be are characteristics of materiality'.⁴⁰ The question now is, how does matter whose nature it is to be mortal, become immortal in Igbo anthroposomy? What is the nature of this 'immortal soma'?

This issue of 'corporeal immortality' is an enigma to Igbo anthropologists. Matter cannot be both corruptible and incorruptible simultaneously. The idea of 'corporeal immortality' has to be understood within the general problem of immortality of persons, in one sense, and

that of the interfusion of religion and philosophy, in another sense. Western culture exemplified in the thoughts of Plato, Scotus, Aquinas, etc propagate the doctrine of eternal survival of the person in the 'immortality of souls'. This doctrine is plausible only within the framework of Platonic dualism, of the separation of body and soul. The soul here has to be equiperated with the person if the doctrine is to be meaningful. But the Igbos have an integral conception of man. Just as death essentially affects the whole human being,⁴¹ immortality also does not exclude any aspect of man. The Igbos do not say, the soul of the dead has gone to the spirit world, but man himself. It is not the 'soul' or 'part of man', but the entire person though in a mysterious way. This is buttressed by the phenomenon of *ehibi*, whereby a living-dead appears in the form of a ghost, and is identified with all the bodily qualities of shape, sound and motion of a specific dead one.

Furthermore, if one agrees with Scotus that it is not possible to adduce a rational proof or disproof of immortality in general,⁴² it would help one to properly situate the "corporeal immortality" of the Igbo within the ambient of religio-mystical phenomena. The last word in this issue is yet to be heard.

Now, the problem of *ilo-uma* revolves around the issue of personal identity. Where lies the identity between the 'living-dead' and his 'returned self' - in mind or in body, or in both mind and body? And if, however, there is established identity, why do the Igbo still persist in the cult of the ancestors who are believed to have 'returned'? What we have is an either/or situation. Either the ancestors' continued existence in the spirit world is false and *ilo-uma* is true, or vice-versa. Eneh chose to justify the continued existence of the ancestors, thereby making the arguments for *ilo-uma* an exercise in foolery.

On the other hand, we note that a proper understanding of the Igbo idea of *ilo-uma* does not create ambivalence. What the Igbos mean by 'return', *ilo-uma* cannot be equated with reincarnation in the sense of strict replication of personal identity. Onyewuenyi⁴³ has copiously elaborated that the resurgence of genes manifested in bodily marks, facial resemblances and personality traits constitute the unmistakable proof of identity of the new born with the departed. Identity, not in the sense of replication or oneness of soul, but in the sense of resemblance. This is where Madu⁴⁴ is mistaken in his criticism of Onyewuenyi, because the presence of identifiable similar traits does not prove of identity of personality. More so, Madu himself conceded later in his work that 'the argument is not that body and character similarities do establish reincarnation.'⁴⁵ There is, therefore, no basis for ubiquity of existence. The

Igbos believe that their dead inhabit the spirit world. They also believe that from the spirit world, their 'living-dead' emit their 'vital force' into their progenies. This is what is called *ilo-uma*. The vital influence of the departed on his descendants neither proves ubiquity of existence nor destroys or diminishes the life of the departed in the spirit world.

The third issue concerning the *Ilo-uma* criteria and the resurgence of genes is a direct follow-up to the resolution of the issue of ubiquity of existence. The ancestors or the living-dead who are believed to have 'returned' in the sense of *ilo-uma*, do not have dual existence. What is identified in the newborn is a resurgence of character and bodily marks of the diseased. But the Igbos equally insist on some criteria, the fulfillment of which grants an individual the capacity to return, such as attainment of personhood, marrying and having of children, living an upright life to an old age, and receiving full burial rites at death. The inability to fulfill these renders one incapable of 'return' in the sense of *ilo-uma*. Now, the issue is, if *ilo-uma* is rightly the resurgence of character and bodily marks, how is it that some people are excluded on account, for instance, of "improper" burial? Is the resurgence of genetic traits checked by improper conducts, youthful deaths and un-ritualized burials?

We may not find it difficult to admit that the criteria of 'marriage' and 'having children' are necessary for the transmission of genes from one generation to another, but what of others? Perhaps, one would say that the placement of criteria for *ilo-uma* is done because of the over all desire of the Igbo for excellence in life. Their competitive spirit, marked with a high sense of industry, lend credence to their saying that 'whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. Improper conduct, youthful or bad death (Onwu Ojoo) and improper burial do not smack of a good life in Igbo culture, and so is abhorred by all. No one wants to be associated with these. Less attention, if any, is given to the peculiar characters of those implicated in them. Consequently no one is identified as having come from them. Even when there is evident similarity of characters between a newborn and a living dead implicated in these criteria, rather than identifying the two, the Igbos would prefer to identify such a newborn with an ancestor in the distant past, since time does not restrict the transmission of traits. If there is any hope of return for someone who had a bad death, for instance, it is in the sense of *Oghanje*.

In the over all economy of human life, birth and death are necessary gateways to the earthly and ancestral phases of life. The two phases are so successive and necessary that human life in Igbo culture remains a continuum:⁴⁶ from life to death, and death to life. This is the destiny of all.

Rebirth is for everyone either in the much revered sense of *ilo-uma*, or in the unwanted sense of *Ogbanje*. But not every one does actually come back in these senses.

Certainly, our explication of the enigmas and ambivalences associated with the Igbo theory of rebirth is not conclusive. Often, it is not very easy to couch a people's beliefs founded upon some mystical experiences in syllogistic terms. Being a paranormal feature, *ilo-uma* will never cease to confound the rational mind, even though for the Igbos, it constitutes a rallying point in the destiny of the human person.

End Notes:

1. N. Angha, "The Forgotten Realm of Destiny", in *Sufism: An Inquiry*, <http://www.ias.org/index.html>
2. R.O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs And Myths*. p. 123
3. B. Gbulie. *Nigeria's Five Majors* (Onitsha: Africana, 1981), p.3
4. "The meaning of Destiny and Decree", in *The Way to Truth*, <http://www.islamanswers.net/destiny/meaning.htm>
5. E.M. Migliaracca. "Edipus And His Human Destiny", http://human.nature.com/free_associations/index.Html
6. M. Albrecht & A. Brooks. *Thanatology: Death and Dying*, Spiritual Counterfeits Project, no.1, 1977, p. 5.
7. E. Ikenga-Metuh. *ONYEGBULE: Ndi Igbo Na Nsopuru Ndu*. (ODENIGBO 1998 Lecture). Owerre: Assumpta Press, 1998, p. 62. [Death is the end of life. Since life is of primal importance, death is a catastrophe. It removes our loved ones from us. Death puts an end to a man's plans and life endeavours. It silences its victim.]
8. The idea of death as a departure, *Olila* is very profound in Igbo culture. This is specially prominent in the works of C.O. Obiego, *Igbo Idea of life and Death in Relation to Chukwu, God*, and E. Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man In Africa Religions* (1981), etc.
9. J.S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (N.Y.: Double day & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 207.
10. Many authors have adduced different classes of death. For some, it is three: *Onwu ike*, *Onwu Ojoo* and *Onwu Chi* (Ikenga-Metuh, 1998); for others, it is as many as seven. But all agree to the two main broad categories: *Onwu Chi* and *Onwu Ojoo*, under which all other subdivisions are subsumed.

11. In the next subsection, we shall see how the Igbos dispose of their dead.
12. *Oghanje* (repeater child) is a malevolent spirit that makes a child to die and to be reborn again severally as a means of punishing its parents. We shall treat it in details towards the end of this chapter.
13. J.I Obilor. *The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead and Igbo Belief in the "Reincarnation"*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994) p. 210.
14. E. Ikenga-Metuh. *ONYEGBULE: Ndi Igbo Na Nsopuru Ndu*. p. 62
15. R.O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. p. 127
16. I. Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), p. 127.
17. R.O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. p. 128.
18. C. Darrow. "The Myth of Immortality" in Paul Edwards and A. Pap (Eds.) *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*. (New York: Free Press, 1973), pp 261-262.
19. Burying a full person is a costly exercise in Igbo land, since he is to be buried with food, clothing and all his paraphernalia. If there is not enough resources to foot the cost, the ritual ceremonies are delayed until such costs could be executed.
20. G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1966), p. 273.
21. I.C. Onyewuenyi. *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 1996), p. 37.
22. There are many reasons why the journey of the dead to the land of the ancestors could be impeded. **(1)** If he had a bad / unnatural death (Onwu Ojoo) which could be either *Onwu ike*, *Onwu mgbabi* or *onwu obi mmiri* and **(2)** if he was not accorded proper burial rites even when he died of *onwu chi* (natural death).
23. The phrase 'higher religions' is used here to denote all forms of belief systems which acknowledge the existence of a transcendent creator to whom all forms of creatures are accountable at the end of their lives.
24. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body is akin to the Igbo teaching of the spiritualization of the body. Even though the time and purpose of the resurrection may differ, both teachings acknowledge that sometime after death, the body and the spirit are reunited in some form of a spiritualized but identifiable mode of existence of one and the same person.
25. I.C. Onyewuenyi. *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal*, p. 38
26. J.Jahn. *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*. (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 109.
27. F.U. Okafor. *Igbo Philosophy of Law*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension

- Publishing Co. 1992), p. 26
28. C.Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. p. 86
 29. The ancestor according to Obiego's definition are "men who while on earth founded lineages, were good and popular, died without blemish after good old age and received proper burial" (cf *Igbo idea of life and death*, p. 225) This would have sufficed for the category of beings that 'return' save that it discriminates against women. Nevertheless, authors like A. Ekwunife mistakenly insisted that attainment of ancestorhood is the criterion for "return". *Meaning and Function of "INO UWA" in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture*. (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd, 1999), p. 34.
 30. Here, J.I. Obilor tries to articulate the core facilitator of *ilo-uwa* as was presented in the responses of his various informants.
 31. C.U. M. Ezekwugo. *Chi, The True God in Igbo Religion*. (Innsbruck, Austria: 1973), p. 156. cf J.I. Obilor. *The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead and the Igbo Belief in the "Reincarnation"*. p. 139.
 32. I.C. Onyewuenyi. *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal* pp. 38-40.
 33. A.N.O. Ekwunife. *Meaning and Function of "INO UWA" in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture*. pp. 32 – 33
 34. A. N.O. Ekwunife *Meaning and Function of "INO UWA" in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture*. p. 33.
 35. J.I. Obilor. *The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead and the Igbo Belief in the "Reincarnation"*. p. 138.
 36. E. Ikenga-Metuh. *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes*. p. 96.
 37. I.P. Anozia. *The Religious Import of Igbo Names*. (Doctoral Work, Rome: Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, 1968), p. 18.
 38. R. C. Onwuanibe. "The Human person and Immortality in Ibo (African) Metaphysics" in *African Philosophy, An Introduction*, (3rd.ed.) Richard A. Wright, (ed.). (U.S.A.: University Press of America, 1984), p. 192.
 39. A.N.O. Ekwunife. *Meaning and Function of "INO UWA" in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture*. p. 45.
 40. C. N. Ogbujah. *The Idea of Personhood*. (Enugu: Snaap Press Nig. Ltd, 2006), p. 111
 41. T. Okere. *Can There Be an African Philosophy? A Hermeneutic study with special Reference to Igbo Culture* (Doctoral thesis, Louvain, Dec. 1971), p. 103.

42. R. Cross. *Duns Scotus (Great Mediaeval Thinkers)*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 10.
43. I.C. Onyewuenyi. *Africa Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal*. pp.39-41
44. R.O Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. pp 265-266. Here, Madu tries to discountenance Onyewueyi's view that children are not identified with the dead in *ilo-uwa*, by insisting that full identity is the only acceptable sign of reincarnation. Madu's view here is faulted in two ways **(1)** He seems oblivious of the fact that in reincarnation what we have is partial identity; only the soul comes back to animate another body. The old body does not return. **(2)** He fails to understand that what Onyewuenyi was referring to was *ilo-uwa*, and this was done in contradistinction to reincarnation. There is therefore, no basis for him to take *ilo-uwa* for reincarnation.
45. R.O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. p. 266.
46. R. O. Madu. *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. 270.

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18. Wright, Richard, A. (ed), *African Philosophy, An Introduction*, (3rd.ed.) (U.S.A.: University Press of America, 1984)